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Conrad Jamison Jr.: The Brief Life of a Tennessee Naturalist

By Roger A. McCoy and Thorunn A. McCoy

Spinulose Wood Fern

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During an evening of his 1942 winter break from George Peabody College in Nashville, Conrad Jamison Jr. and his friends William Simpson and Arthur McMurry walked their dates along the dark streets of Franklin. The trio heard the call of young Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) and to the likely disdain of the young ladies, the three hurried their dates home, returning quickly to the large White Oak for further investigation.

Without the aid of flashlights, they relied on the headlights of passing cars to catch glimpses of adult Barn Owls feeding their young, an occurrence some birders thought unlikely for the end of December. The following morning, Jamison and Simpson returned and, to the delight of the elderly homeowner, climbed the tree and banded the young owls.

Jamison and Simpson were no strangers to banding owl nestlings in the cold. In December of 1939 when Jamison was still a senior at Peabody Demonstration School (now University School of Nashville), he and Simpson found an adult Barn Owl and two young while traveling to Radnor Lake. With a bit of difficulty, the pair managed to band these examples of late fall breeding birds and record the data.

Jamison gained further insight into Barn Owls when he successfully raised a young bird found near Woodmont Boulevard in Nashville. The pair published their findings in the December 1942 edition of *The Migrant*, the quarterly journal of the Tennessee Ornithological Society. Citing the Barn Owls in Franklin and previous sightings in Nashville by Jamison and Simpson, the young men concluded that fall nesting in Tennessee was a regular occurrence.

Conrad Jamison Jr. had a curiosity about nature that transcended his short life and his work continues to inform Tennesseans. His keen eye for nature and love of science are not only apparent in his observations about birds but also in his teaching and his art.

Jamison, however, also had another love, his country. And for that devotion, he, like many Tennesseans, paid the ultimate price.

Born July 10, 1922 in High Point, North Carolina, Jamison moved to Nashville as a

youngster and began his life-long interest in nature and in sharing his findings with others.

After attaining the rank of Eagle Scout at age 16, Jamison became an instructor for the bird-study merit badge at the Boy Scouts' Camp Boxwell, then located at the Narrows of the Harpeth River in Cheatham County. Never missing an opportunity to teach others, he was also active in working with young people at Nashville's Vine Street Christian Church. In addition, Jamison's work with the TOS, which began in 1937, included many birding outings where he documented his findings, banded various species, and studied birds of prey, including training some for falconry.

Jamison enrolled in Peabody Demonstration School as a senior in 1939. There, in addition to being president of the student council, he organized the bird club which met each Wednesday to participate in round table discussions, review magazine articles about birding, or view a motion picture on the subject. When the weather allowed, meetings were extended for birding field trips to the Peabody College and Vanderbilt University campuses, along with occasional off-site field trips to Radnor Lake.

After graduating high school, Jamison enrolled in the George Peabody College in Nashville (now part of Vanderbilt University) where he utilized his artistic skill and made numerous illustrations of birds. These illustrations caught the attention of Dr. Jesse Shaver who was compiling a manuscript on the ferns of Tennessee. Due to concerns of the time and finances needed for such a project, Dr. Shaver elected to publish small portions of his work in the Journal of the Tennessee Academy of Science, Volume 17 (1942) and Volume 29 (1954).

Jamison accompanied Dr. Shaver on botanical collecting trips throughout Tennessee and illustrated many fern species.

The professor lauded Jamison on his "fine pen work" and published the co-ed's illustrations with his early articles in the Journal of the Tennessee Academy of Science and in the Ferns of the Eastern Central States with Special Reference to Tennessee. This book, originally published in 1954, still serves as the definitive reference for Tennessee ferns. No fewer than 36 of Jamison's illustrations appear in this work; all were done before his graduation from college.

During high school and college, Jamison and other young men regularly assisted Amelia Laskey, who is known for establishing the bluebird trail at Percy Warner Park in Nashville in 1936 and for contributing numerous bird observations for scientific literature, with banding Chimney Swifts. The party would set off with Laskey's 40-foot extension ladder to search rooftops, chimneys, fire escapes and "other unconventional places" around Nashville for flocks. They often ended their outings covered in soot. However, Laskey's hard work over the years paid off. After they handled of over 28,000 birds, she was informed that one of the banded Chimney Swifts had been documented from River Yanayaco, Peru, a first proven-record of the species in its winter home in South America.

Many of the young men who regularly assisted Laskey moved from Nashville during their college years, but according to her, Jamison "fortunately remains in Nashville as he is a sophomore from Peabody College" and "has become the 'engineer' of the Swift banding project since William [Simpson] left."

Jamison appears to have never missed an opportunity to observe birds, teach about birds or record his findings for others to learn from and use. As vice president of the Nashville Chapter of TOS, Jamison regularly wrote articles for The Migrant, updating

members on the Nashville chapter's field outings and observations.

While working on the construction of the Army Air Forces Classification Center in Nashville during the summer of 1942, Jamison made published notes in *The Migrant* about his findings. "Three pairs of Red-headed Woodpeckers raised their young on the camp area this summer. In view of their recent reported scarcity- it may be of interest to state that the writer located 3 or 4 additional pair about the city."

While Jamison was busy with his schooling, his teaching at Camp Boxwell, his membership in TOS, and his botanical illustrations, the United States was engaged in a global war. World War II affected the naturalist's observations as many TOS members on the homefront were restricted from field trips and meetings due to travel restrictions and gas rationing.

War rationing also limited metal bird bands, and the paper weight and number of pages of *The Migrant* were reduced. Rather than enroll in Vanderbilt Medical School upon his completion of his B.S. in August, 1944, Jamison joined the Armed Forces. His service during World War II was not unlike many other members of TOS. During the war, *The Migrant* was used to update state-side members of the current address of members in the Armed Forces. Sadly, the journal was also used to list those who had perished in the conflict.

Jamison completed basic training at Camp Blanding, a large training facility in the northern panhandle of Florida on Kingsley Lake. It is easy to imagine Jamison on the extended hikes to Keystone Heights, camping out overnight at the nearby reservation, and birding and taking notes on his observations as he did in Tennessee. Training in the Army's Intelligence and Reconnaissance School soon followed.

Assigned to the 376th Infantry Regiment of the 94th Infantry Division, Jamison arrived in France on January 22, 1945. The 376th had been in Europe since September 14, 1944, and although just over four months had passed, it is likely that the hardened veterans who had spent 106 days on the front lines at St. Nazaire viewed Jamison as a young, green recruit, despite his being older than most men on the line.

Shortly after Jamison's arrival, the 376th was attached to the 10th Armored Division and ordered to take the bridges across the Saar River near Okfen, Germany. Knowing their value to the advancing American Army, the Germans destroyed the bridges, and on February 22, 1945, a boat crossing took place under German small arms and artillery fire. The river crossing was successful, but on February 25, only 34 days after arriving in continental Europe, Private Conrad Jamison was killed in action.

We will never know what would have become of Jamison's life had he survived the war in Europe, whether he would have pursued his career in medicine or chosen one in zoology or botany, but considering his many accomplishments during his short life, it is likely Jamison would have continued to contribute to our knowledge of the natural world. Jamison's contributions to Tennessee still resonate nearly 60 years after his death. His birding records from Davidson and Williamson counties provide a historical snap shot of bird species of the Nashville area, and his detailed plant drawings still aid in fern identification.

Jamison's past Barn Owl observations prove useful since the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency has the bird listed "Deemed in Need of Management," a species' protection status just below the "Threatened" or "Endangered" listing. Trips he took to Radnor Lake long predate its 1973 designation as a State Natural Area and note the

importance of maintaining natural habitats for migratory and nesting birds.

The words of Albert Gainer, one of the original members of the TOS, best describe Jamison and what his loss meant: "[I] quite frequently had the pleasure of Conrad's company on trips afield and found him a tireless and most congenial companion. Quiet, dependable and of a lovable disposition, his loss was a sad blow to the host of friends he left behind."

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